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**An Identity Perspective of Key Account Managers  
as Paradoxical Relationship Managers**

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## 1. Introduction

Managing business-to-business (B2B) customer relationships has become an issue of ecosystem orchestration (Hartmann et al., 2018; Perks et al., 2017; Ulaga & Kohli, 2018) rather than one of managing dyadic exchange. The recognition of value co-creation (Vargo & Lusch, 2004, 2016; Payne et al., 2008; Pohlmann & Kaartemo, 2017; Toth et al., 2018) through resource integration as the core of companies' activities implies a systemic view in the sense that resources come from different actors within a business network. A systemic perspective of managing B2B relationships not only acknowledges that a relationship is managed *within* a network (Anderson et al., 1994), it also emphasizes that managing B2B relationships actually involves integrating resources from many more actors than the buyer and the seller (Dixon & Tanner, 2012; Hartmann et al., 2018). The trends toward servitization (Kowalkowski, Gebauer, Kamp, & Parry, 2017) and solutions-based business (Kowalkowski, Gebauer & Oliva, 2017; Ulaga & Reinartz, 2011) further contribute to an understanding of B2B relationships as a phenomenon involving many actors at the buyer and seller companies and their connected networks. Similarly, the institutional perspective of marketing (Vargo & Lusch, 2016; Hartmann et al., 2018) reinforces this ecosystem perspective by emphasizing the role companies can play in creating and influencing institutional arrangements with 'broader sets of actors' (Hartmann et al., 2018) through the production of narratives (Philips et al., 2004).

As a consequence, actors in charge of managing specific B2B relationships are increasingly occupied with coordinating resources as well as the activities of the various other actors they rely on in order to reach their objectives (Hartmann et al. 2018). These B2B relationship managers coordinate internal actors inside their own company (Johnson et al., 2017; Le Meunier-FitzHugh & Piercy, 2011), external actors inside the client company (Chandler & Johnston, 2012; Ulaga & Kohli, 2018), and external actors belonging to the surrounding

business network (Moller & Rajala, 2007; Moller & Svahn, 2009; Perks et al., 2018). This is particularly the case when inter-organizational relationships are established between suppliers and strategic customers (i.e., key accounts). Such relationships are often highly complex because they involve many individual actors and teams of actors on the supplier side (Georges & Eggert, 2003; Guesalaga, 2014; Hutt & Walker, 2006; Pardo et al; 2014; Speakman & Ryals, 2012; Workman et al, 2003) and in the supplier's network (Senn et al., 2013), and many individual actors and teams of actors on the KA side (Gounaris & Tzempelikos, 2014; Guesalaga et al, 2018) and from the KA's network (Ojasalo, 2004; Senn et al, 2013). Complexity may arise from many sources, such as geographical or functional organization, process design, hierarchical distribution of power, channel designs, or brand portfolios.

As a consequence, the increasing level of heterogeneity in interpersonal relationships that a KA manager needs to handle deserves attention. In order to achieve the objectives of key account management (KAM), KA managers need to cope with differences or tensions that may arise between the numerous types of interpersonal relationships they depend on when managing their KA. However, the sales and marketing literatures have paid little attention to such actor-related challenges. Empirical results that do exist remain somewhat fragmented. For example, alignment between the KAM function and other internal functions (Guesalaga & Jonhston, 2010; Pardo et al., 2014) has been highlighted as an important dimension of the organisational context that is required in order to ensure that KA managers and other internal actors can stay 'on the same page' at the level of individuals. For instance, Pardo et al. (2014) discuss how KAM units manage the multiplicity of the intra-organizational relationships they are involved in. They show how these units operate at the same time 'differentiated from' and 'aligned with' other intra-organizational units. Ellis and Ybema (2010) study how relationship managers who are in charge of inter-organizational relationships (between their

company and their customers) oscillate between the ‘inside’ (that is, relationships with their colleagues) and ‘outside’ (that is, relationships with their customers) in order to foster some form of alignment. At an individual level, attitudes and behaviours of KA managers that favour coordination (and eventually resource integration) with others have been studied (Davies & Ryals, 2013; Georges & Eggert, 2003).

Despite these important insights, this stream of research requires additional attention in order to develop a more comprehensive and detailed picture of KA managers, their work, and their identity. We identify two core challenges:

Firstly, the literature has produced some inconclusive results regarding the specific issue of KA managers’ heterogeneous interpersonal relationships. For example, Workman and colleagues (2003) find empirical evidence that KAM team *esprit de corps* has a strong and significant positive impact on KAM effectiveness while the use of KAM teams doesn’t. They define team use as “the extent to which teams are formed to coordinate activities for key accounts” (p. 9) and team *esprit de corps* as “The extent to which people involved in the management of key accounts feel obligated to common goals and to each other” (p. 10). Their results suggest that it “is not the extent of team use that affects KAM effectiveness but rather the development of *esprit de corps* among those involved in the management of key accounts” (p. 15). Against this background, the authors call for more studies on KA managers and their work: “Additional research is needed to understand how key account managers can best accomplish their goals and obtain the needed resources” (p. 16), specifically because “KAM is primarily about managing and coordinating the activities of people over whom the key account manager does not have formal authority” (p. 16). Thus, we respond to Workman et al.’s (2003) invitation to focus research on providing new elements that help understand how key account managers ‘relate’ to others in a company. The identity approach seems to fit this objective.

Secondly, the literature doesn't investigate how KA managers deal and cope with the *increasing heterogeneity* of relationships they handle within the context of their job. While certain studies focus on understanding the actor networks or ecosystems with which KA managers work (e.g., Ellis & Ybema, 2010; Gupta et al., 2019; Ivens et al., 2016), to the best of our knowledge, the personal way in which KA managers insert themselves into these networks has not been explored in a comprehensive manner.

Our research uses the identity concept to explore actor-related issues in KAM. Identity is about "the meanings that individuals attach reflexively to their selves" and allows us to answer the question of how to relate to others (Brown, 2015). Thus, since KA managers are involved in different relationships with different groups or individuals, we suggest that they identify with each of these groups in different ways (Baumeister, 1986; Brown, 2015). The KA manager then operates in a multiple identity situation (Ghadiri, Gond & Brès, 2015; Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003; Brown, 2015), which can result in discomfort (Ghadiri et al., 2015; Brown, 2015) and, in turn, affect performance.

Given the considerable multiplicity and variety of interpersonal relationships they manage, the purpose of this paper is to explore how KA managers make sense of their role as resource integrators in complex B2B ecosystems through engaging in identity work. We suggest that the question of identity is particularly important regarding KA managers because potential conflicts (Brown and Coupland; 2015) or tensions (Järventie-Thesleff & Tienari, 2016) in the way they relate to, and thus identify with, the many different actors surrounding them would be detrimental to those customer relationships that are most strategic for their company. We use an exploratory qualitative research approach in order to gain insights into KA managers' identity perceptions.

This study aims to make two contributions to the KAM literature. First, given that self-perception and the perception of others are equally important antecedents for dependent

variables such as behaviours and performance (e.g., Markus et al. 1985), but that the KAM literature has predominantly studied others' perceptions, we aim to fill the current knowledge gap concerning KA managers' self-perception. Second, extant research (Ellis and Ybema 2010) suggests that KA managers build their identity following an inclusion / exclusion pattern. Since extant identity research argues that identities may be more complex, we propose to re-examine this suggestion to see whether KA managers may be creating position references that reconcile oppositions.

This paper is structured as follows. Section 2 discusses how the extant KAM literature makes reference to the notion of identity and identification, yet doesn't label either concept as central. Hence, in section 3, we introduce the concept of identity and discuss how it can contribute to improving our understanding of the work of KA managers. Section 4 describes our methodology. In section 5, we present our empirical material and findings. Section 6 proposes a discussion of our findings. The final section focuses on the implications and conclusions of the study.

## **2. Key account manager identity in the key account management literature**

Homburg et al. (2002) argue that KAM research falls into three main categories, that is, studies of individual KA managers, studies of supplier-KA relationships, and studies of the design of KAM programs. Our research falls into the first category. In this section, we review in particular contributions to this part of the KAM literature that discusses who KA managers are and how they relate to others in their job.

The origins of the KA manager's function can be traced back to the 1960s. In 1964, "a group of sales professionals" created the National Account Management Association (NAMA) (Napolitano, 1997, p. 1). Napolitano (1997, p. 2) describes KA managers as "not only representing their company to their accounts, but, likewise [...] representing those accounts

within their own company”. Subsequently, the description of who KA managers are was quickly refined. KA managers have been identified as ‘boundary spanners’. The boundary spanning nature of the KA manager position has been described in detail by Wilson and Millman (2003). Yet, KA managers are considered to be more than boundary spanner actors: the key account manager’s position is “more than that of boundary spanner. [KA managers] are essentially concerned with identifying and exploiting entrepreneurial opportunity within the buyer–seller relationship” (Wilson & Millman, 2003, p. 156). In other words, “the boundary-spanning role of the global account manager is not merely concerned with the creation of interactive networks, but with identifying the potentials that exist for problem resolution and the creation of synergistic value” (Wilson & Millman, 2003, p. 154).

Due to the complexity of the position, as they describe it, ‘identification’ of the KA manager is considered a central dimension by Wilson and Millman (2003). The authors make reference to two types of identification: the KA manager’s identification with his/her employer and the KA manager’s identification with his/her account. The KA manager is described as a ‘political’ actor in the sense that he/she displays strong cultural empathy and largely acts via influence/persuasion (Wilson & Millman, 2003; Workman et al., 2003). The KA manager role in the organization was seen as new: “We may be witnessing the emergence of a fundamentally new managerial position” (Wilson & Millman, 2003, p. 152).

Steward et al. (2009) take an interesting perspective to explain how introducing specific KA manager positions resonates with the notion of identity. The authors compare a ‘consultant’ role to the role of a ‘technical specialist’ to describe KA managers. For these authors, the KA manager ‘consultant’ sees him/herself as “aiming to help customers with challenges across all dimensions of their business, with the goal of providing solutions and creating collaborative relationships” (Steward et al., 2009, p. 465). Thus, in addition to the ‘political’ dimension,



KAM also involves ‘collaboration’ as an additional dimension that explains the nature of the KA manager position.

Throughout the work of Wilson and Millman (2003), the ‘coordinative’ dimension of the KA manager is clearly emphasized. The KA manager is in charge of “coordinating the operational capabilities of the supplier organisation” (Wilson & Millman, 2003, p. 153). In a similar perspective, Workman et al. (2003) state that the major task for KA managers is “typically one of internal coordination across functional units, product units, and geographic regions” (Workman et al., 2003, p. 9). This involves KA managers obtaining the “commitment of resources from sales, support, and marketing personnel, particularly when they do not formally report to him or her” (Workman et al., 2003, p. 10).

We propose to group the different facets of the KA manager into four dimensions that converge to build a ‘specific’ position (Davies & Ryals, 2009; LaPlaca, 2014). We suggest that these specificities may influence how KA managers see themselves, i.e., their identity. The four dimensions are:

1. *The boundary-spanning facet.* All salespeople may be seen as boundary-spanning actors, but KA managers’ roles are specific because of the complex nature of their boundary-spanning activity. The KA manager is really at the interface of two ecosystems: the internal network and the external network. Regular salespeople don’t exert such a comprehensive interfacing boundary-spanning role (Hartmann et al., 2018; Homburg et al., 2002; Gupta et al., 2019; Ivens et al., 2016; Pardo et al., 2014).
2. *The coordinative / collaborative facet.* The key account manager doesn’t carry out any specific technical tasks ... but coordinates the work of others. He/she will always be less an expert in R&D than any engineer, less an expert in financing than someone from the finance department, and so on. On the other

hand, the KA manager has the ability to combine complementary expertise from various fields to optimize value creation within the relationship (Georges & Eggert, 2003; Salojärvi et al., 2010; Workman et al., 2003).

3. *The political facet: influence and persuasion.* The KA manager can't make use of a hierarchical position that provides direct control over the necessary resources he/she wants to mobilize in order to create value in relationships. Rather, the KA manager relies on soft and indirect forms of power. These are typically based on influence and persuasion (Wilson & Millman, 2003; Homburg et al., 2002).
4. *The entrepreneurial facet: imagining new combinations of resources.* Although selling as a task constantly evolves in order to adapt to changing market environments, the role of the KA manager occupies a specific place in the evolution of selling. The KA manager, in a way, 'imagines' the relationship to be developed with the customer company in a proactive way. Rather than responding to customer demands so as to be relationship-driven, the work of the KA manager is often relationship-driving, that is, the KA manager organises resources in an entrepreneurial way so as to exploit future opportunities he/she identifies in order to grow the KA relationship (Gounaris & Tzempelikos, 2014; Ivens & Pardo, 2007).

Summarizing, the KAM literature describes the KA manager as a main actor within the value creation process (entrepreneurial facet) in strategic relationships, through the integration of resources (coordinative / collaborative facet) belonging to a variety of actors (boundary-spanner facet) using mainly soft means of influence (political facet). In order to better understand how KA managers exert the role described in this definition, in particular relative

to the multiplicity and variety of actors they are working with, we next discuss the concept of identity and introduce the specific notions of ‘multiple’ and ‘unified’ identity. These concepts will lay the basis for building the analytical framework we use to understand how KA managers make sense of their role as resource integrators in complex B2B ecosystems, that is, how they deal with the multiplicity and variety of relationships they are managing in order to build a ‘successful identity’, that is, an identity that allows them to relate to others with an acceptable level of comfort (Brown, 2015).

### **3. The concept of identity and its contribution to the study**

#### *3.1. Individual identity*

The concept of identity has become central in organization studies (Brown, 2015; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). Different types of identities have been studied, for example, social identities, personal identities, or structural identities (Brown & Coupland, 2015). In this work, we focus on individual identities in the workplace (such as discussed, for example, in Alvesson & Willmott, 2002) and we follow the definition of Brown (2015, p. 21), for whom identity refers to “the meanings that individuals attach reflexively to their selves as they seek to answer questions such as: ‘How shall I relate to others?’, ‘What shall I strive to become?’, and ‘How will I make the basic decisions required to guide my life?’ “.

This research adopts the perspective that the construction of an individual employee’s identity can be analysed in terms of “both socially orchestrated identity regulations (the exercise of power) and individual identity work” (Vachhani, 2006, p. 252). Hence, identity is built at the crossroads of two processes (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003): on the one hand, identity regulations supported by power, that is, the effect of managers’ social practices (e.g., induction, training, or promotion processes) upon an employee’s processes of identity construction; and, on the other hand, individual identity work, that is, processes through

which employees form, maintain, repair, strengthen, or revise their (self-)identity (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). In this study, we are not interested in how KA manager roles are defined in job descriptions, or how they are trained and promoted. We study how KA managers view themselves, that is, their self-perceptions or reflexively organised narratives (Giddens, 1991). Identity is important for employees because it helps them make sense of what they are doing in a company. The importance of ‘making sense’ has increased in recent years since (a) employees work in dynamic and complex environments in which major changes (e.g., digitalisation, internationalisation, or diversity) transform formerly well-known contexts, and (b) because contemporary organizations increasingly assign different roles to one person (Brown & Coupland, 2015). While the latter roles are not necessarily always contradictory, they often lead to perceived tensions (Järventie-Thesleff & Tienari, 2016). In addition, Alvesson and Willmott (2002) emphasize a ‘sense of coherence and distinctiveness’ as being the output of identity work. Research has shown that “identity entails a set of mental models that are situationally evoked” (Hoff and Pandey, 2014, p.118) and that the effect of identity on performance depends on social setting. Hence, identity is multi-faceted and adaptable. It thus appears that the concept of identity fits the nature of the KA manager’s task particularly well and potentially offers a fruitful way to analyse how a KA manager becomes an orchestrator of, as well as within, a business ecosystem. We have shown in our introduction that KA managers act as resource integrators between many different individual and organizational actors with whom they can identify, so as to relate to them in an effective way (Baumeister, 1986; Brown, 2015). Possible discrepancies may emerge between these different identities developed in order to fit each type of relationship a key account manager is involved in. In order to explore this issue, we briefly synthesize how the literature on identities deals with it.

### *3.2. Unified vs. multiple identity*

Individuals evolve in increasingly fragmented contexts (characterized by instability, turbulence, change and contradictions) (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). As a consequence, identity research has increasingly adopted the notion that employees have fragmented or multiple identities, as opposed to a coherent, unified identity (Brown, 2015). An important part of the extant research on identity refers to the tensions and contradictions amongst which one needs to build an identity. Tensions are defined as the ‘stresses and strains’ stemming from contradictory demands placed on one’s identity (Ghadiri et al., 2015, p. 5). Tensions may appear in different forms: paradoxes (or dualities), dilemmas or dialectics (Smith & Lewis, 2011). Sveningsson and Alvesson posit that individuals look for “comfort, meaning and integration and some correspondence between a self-definition and work situation” (2003, p. 1188). For Ghadiri, Gond and Brès (2015, p. 5) individuals make “efforts aimed at securing a socially viable identity positioning in the ‘here and now’ of an interaction”.

To deal with the dilemma they are faced with (that is, acting in a complex environment and looking for a viable identity), actors adopt specific practices. For instance, Ghadiri et al. suggest that individuals simultaneously ‘embrace’ *and* ‘distance’ themselves “from contradictory identity demands” (2015, p. 21). In such circumstances, the identity is neither coherent nor unified. It remains characterized by its ‘paradoxical nature’, with an obligation for the individual to renounce “the comfort of a coherent self-understanding” (2015, p. 21). Thus, as Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003) stress, the fragmentation of the context in which an individual evolves, or the fragmentation of the tasks he/she is assigned to, does not necessarily lead to “a fragmented identity” (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003, p. 1187).

### *3.3. Paradoxes*

For the purpose of this research, we adopt the conceptual lens of paradox research as formulated by Smith and Lewis (2011). Reviewing 360 documents from different streams of paradox research, these authors define paradox as “contradictory yet interrelated elements

that exist simultaneously and persist over time. Such elements seem logical when considered in isolation but irrational, inconsistent, and even absurd when juxtaposed” (2011, p.386). This definition highlights two core characteristics of paradox, that is, contradiction and interdependence (Schad et al., 2016). Contradiction causes actors to feel tension and perceive a challenge in coping with this tension. Interdependence highlights the link that exists between the two or more elements between which actors perceive tension, sometimes constituting a “cyclical relationship between opposing forces” (Schad et al., 2016, p.17).

In this research we also rely on Smith and Lewis (2011) concerning the idea of ‘management strategies’ for paradoxes. Along with the authors, we consider that paradox could be managed. In such cases the idea is to avoid the negative consequences of paradoxical tensions (see Smith and Lewis, 2011, p. 391 for a description of paradox’s negative consequences) and keep the positive ones (amongst which, creativity).

In addition, Miron-Spektor et al. (2018) suggest that employees who have a ‘*paradox mindset*’, that is, employees “who can cope and even thrive with everyday tensions” (Miron-Spektor et al., 2018, p. 40), show better performances in their job in the sense that they manage to achieve multiple conflicting demands. For example, they are better at learning and driving innovation, which are arguably two important skills for KA managers. This perspective is important because it also suggests that a job like the one of KA managers may require specific attention in recruitment processes. More than for other sales-related jobs, it is important that KA managers are able to attend to different perspectives, resist forces pulling in opposing directions, and cope with competitive expectations that imply strategic conflict (Donaldson & Preston, 1995). Such a paradox mind-set encompasses both cognitive processes and affective reactions (Miron-Spektor et al., 2018; Vince & Broussine, 1996).

#### **4. Methodology**

The nature of our research question suggests the need for a qualitative research approach. To the best of our knowledge, the (self-) identity approach of KA managers (or of comparable network-coordinating employees acting across company borders) has never been theorized and the elements that build such an identity are mostly unknown.

In this research, we adopt a narrative approach to identity, that is, following the perspective taken by numerous identity scholars (Brown, 2015; Brown & Coupland, 2015; Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000; Vachhani, 2006) we consider that identities are “construed through discourse and other symbolic means” (Brown 2015, p. 21). They are “assembled out of cultural raw material: language, symbols, sets of meanings, values, etc.” (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002, p. 626). In particular, we focus on “those practices of talk by which people, talking as particular kinds of subjects, author self-narratives” (Brown & Coupland, 2015, p. 1317). We thus aim to explore recurrent themes and metaphors used by respondents when they talk about their way of making sense of their role as resource integrators in complex B2B ecosystems. In doing so, we build on research conducted by O’Connor (1995) and Vachhani (2006).

This study thus uses a qualitative methodological approach that explores the discourse of KA managers concerning how they make sense of their role in complex B2B ecosystems through their identity work. Our objective is to discover, in these narratives, the themes and metaphors used relative to the question of ‘how KA managers relate to others’, which - following Brown’s (2015) stance - we consider to be a central aspect of an individual’s identity.

#### *4.1 Data collection*

Semi-structured interviews serve as our primary source of data. A total of 42 interviews (see Table 1) with key account managers were carried out in six different activity sectors

(Chemicals; Energy & Utilities; Equipment Manufacturing; Pharmaceuticals; Transportation; Telecoms) and in two countries (Germany and France).

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Insert Table 1 about here

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All face-to-face interviews lasted between 90 minutes and two and a half hours. All interviews except four were audio-recorded. For those interviews that were recorded, an extensive transcription was made. For the remaining four others, extensive notes were taken during the meetings and used as the basis of the content analysis. During the interviews, KA managers were asked to describe their activities extensively: relationships with the KA customers they were in charge of, as well as internal relationships within their own organization. The KA managers were also encouraged to elaborate on any aspect of their job that they considered to be particularly relevant or of importance in order to make sense of their role as resource integrators in complex B2B ecosystems.

#### *4.2 Data analysis*

Transcriptions of audio-recorded interviews along with extensive notes were analysed. The analysis focused on different aspects of the interviewees' discourse. Particular attention was given to elements that could be considered as representative of how KA managers' make sense of their role as resource integrators in complex B2B ecosystems, that is, references to groups of actors with whom KA managers have relationships.

The analysis and interpretation stages largely followed the inductive Gioia methodology (Gioia et al., 2013; Langley & Abdallah, 2011). We first open coded (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) all the transcripts we had, which led us to a large number of categories (more than 60). Following Strauss and Corbin (1998), we thus looked for similarities and differences among



the many categories and ended up with 33 categories (See Table 2). According to Gioia et al. (2013), 33 categories of concepts for a first level analysis is slightly more than the 25/30 categories recommended as an acceptable manageable number of first category codes. We nevertheless decided to go ahead with all these categories. The 33 categories are considered ‘concepts’ in the Gioia approach, which means that they are general notions that describe the phenomenon we are investigating: they are making sense of what we have observed (Gioia & al., 2013).

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Insert Table 2 about here

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In the second step of the analysis, we carried out a ‘comparison and abstraction’ of those first-order concepts. According to Gioia et al. (2013), this second-order analysis looks for a ‘deeper structure’ in the list of ‘concepts’ identified in the first-order analysis. It operates at a more abstract, theoretical level. The objective is to identify themes or dimensions that give a structure to the terms identified in the first-order analysis and can help us understand “what’s going on here!” (Gioia et al., 2013, p. 20). While the first-order analysis is close to the informant’s voice, the second-order analysis is close to the researcher’s voice. In line with the idea of identity as connected to the issue of ‘how I relate to others’, we thus organized the 33 concepts of the first-order analysis into nine ‘themes’ (see Tables 3 and 4), thereby rendering visible an underlying structure in the data (Gioia et al., 2013).

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Insert Table 3 and Table 4 about here

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In a third step, we tried to find out how the different themes of the second order analysis could be linked with one another. We followed Gioia et al.'s (2013) suggestion to “conduct additional consultations with the literature to refine articulation of emergent concepts and relationships” (p. 26). Guided by both (a) our initial research question that springs from the diversity of the actors that KA managers are in contact with, and (b) our data structure, the concept of ‘paradox’ emerged as a useful theme for our work. By making reference to the ‘paradoxical’ character of KA managers’ identities, our intention is not to add a new concept to the theoretical background of our research, but rather to show “dynamic relationships among the emergent concepts” (Gioia et al., 2013, p. 22). As presented in Section 3, we define paradoxes (or dualities) as the coexistence of opposites (Lewis, 2000; Smith & Lewis, 2011) that emerge when analysing the relationship between second-order themes.

We identified six paradoxes related to the nine second-order themes revealed by our analysis (see Figure 1). Two of the nine themes of the second-order analysis appear in more than one paradox. This is the case with the ‘being integrated’ theme, which builds the ‘not sales / sales’ paradox, the ‘everywhere / nowhere’, and the ‘top / bottom’ ones. Indeed, when coming back to the narratives, KA managers refer both to their proximity to the sales function (“*KAM is not sales, but it has a link to sales*”), their involvement with people at ‘low hierarchical levels’ (“*I remember wearing overalls and going with the handler...*”), and their ability to navigate through the whole company (“*I’m at the crossroads*”). It is also the case with the ‘supporting my company’ theme. Here, KA managers refer both to their ‘company orientation’ (as opposed to the customer-orientation) (“*we were ready to tell [the customer]: we stop everything*”) and their role in supporting other functions internally (“*we are here to tell there is a world beyond your business*”).

Insert Figure 1 about here

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## 5. Findings

In this section, we present, illustrate and discuss each of the six paradoxes that have emerged from our data analysis around how KA managers make sense of their role as resource integrators in complex B2B ecosystems. We illustrate each identity paradox with narratives that are representative of how KA managers envision their identity. Individually, each of the six paradoxes has been evoked in the KAM literature in one way or another. We believe that this research allows us to integrate aspects of KA manager identity that have, thus far, been discussed in a somewhat fragmented way into a comprehensive framework of KA manager identity.

This section provides a brief discussion of the six paradoxes. For every paradox, we show how it has been evoked in extant research and we discuss which additional link with KA manager identity may require further investigation.

### 5.1. *'Close to the sales function' Vs 'different from a salesperson'*

The KA managers in our study describe themselves as being different from salespeople. This reference to differences between KAM and sales mirrors observations made in the literature. For example, Wotruba and Castleberry (1993) emphasize that “Work of NAMs<sup>1</sup> is distinct from that of the regular sales force’ and that it is necessary for KA managers to ‘coordinat[e] and motivat[e] the efforts and communications of their company's regular salespeople” (p. 50). Authors such as Sengupta et al. (2000) or Millman and Wilson (1999) also stress the

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<sup>1</sup> NAM stands for National Account Manager. Scholars and practitioners alike use various terms, such as national, corporate, global, regional, or strategic in conjunction with account management. While these terms aren't fully synonymous, they all refer to the management of customers that have high strategic importance for a supplier firm. NAM was particularly used in early years of KAM concepts in the U.S., resulting in today's SAMA (Strategic Account Management Association) using the abbreviation NAMA (National Account Marketing Association) until 1999. National was referring to those customers with activities in various areas of the US territory. However, through globalization, the multi-location phenomenon characterizing these specific customers soon exceeded national territories and KAM (rather than NAM) became the commonly used-term.

need to distinguish between a KA salesperson and a general field salesperson, not least because the customers both groups serve are different. Davies and Ryals (2013) study these differences between KA managers and salespeople in more detail, identifying specific attitudes and behaviours on which KA managers differ from salespeople. At the same time, while ‘being distinct from salespeople’ and ‘having contacts with salespeople’ are characteristics that authors have used in order to qualify KA managers’ positions, little has been said about how this affects the way KA managers relate to others, i.e., how KA managers build their identity.

Our research suggests that KA managers perceive themselves as different from salespeople for at least two reasons: First, a differentiated identity from salespeople helps KA managers to limit the level of direct competition between the two types of positions. Second, a differentiated identity allows KA managers, and the KAM function more generally, to maintain an image of uniqueness, even after years of implementation. This is reflected in the following statements that are representative of several other respondents’ statements:

- *“I’ve been around a long time, and I can assure you that there is no equivalent to the key account manager’s job!” (Mr Majc, Key Account Manager, Equipment Manufacturing)*
- *“No other job in the company covers what we are doing here!” (Mr Bang, Key Account Manager, Pharmaceuticals)*

Within KA managers’ discourse, and in line with findings by Wotruba and Castleberry (1993) or Sengupta et al. (2000), the point is clearly made that their job cannot be considered equivalent to a sales job:

- *“The mission is different relative to time, it’s different in scope, and it’s different in the process. And in addition, your interlocutors are not of the same type.” (Mr Gill, Key Account Manager, Equipment Manufacturing)*

It is thus perceived as unique. But ‘unique’ is not enough to build the identity of the position.

Establishing an ‘I’m not’ identity supposes that sales activity is outlined in a very ‘differentiated’ way. In a sense, to define who he/she is, the KA manager needs to construe the identity of ‘the others’. The KA manager does ‘more’ than the salespeople. ‘More’ may mean at least two different things. First, a KA manager works with a customer over a longer-term time horizon:

- *“It’s someone who steps back and looks at the overall picture and works long term.” (Mr Gill, Key Account Manager, Equipment Manufacturing)*
- *“The key account manager is someone who needs to have time.” (Mr Stei, Key Account Manager, Pharmaceuticals)*
- *“[Managing a key account customer is] different in the process. It’s different in time.” (Mr Schl, Key Account Manager, Pharmaceuticals)*

Second, ‘more’ may also be interpreted in the sense that a KA manager doesn’t work with ‘products’ or ‘services’ but rather with activities and solutions. Products and services are only ‘means’ by which KA managers build and develop a relationship with a KA customer; they may constitute the starting points for the development of customer-focused solutions, but they are insufficient in order to create adequate value for a strategic customer such as a KA:

- *“I, what I’m dealing with, are not products. We are not here to manage screws and bolts!” (Mr Chan, Key Account Manager, Equipment Manufacturing)*
- *“If I focus on the contingencies of daily life, I will miss what will happen. What I should focus on is my customer’s activity.” (Mr Weru, Key Account Manager, Pharmaceuticals)*

This is particularly interesting in the numerous cases in which KA managers were salespeople before moving toward the KA manager position. In a way, this prevents them from being too harsh with regard to salespeople’s positions:

- *“In the majority of cases KA managers come from the sales function. KAM is not ‘sales’, but it has a link to sales.” (Mr Loct, Key Account Manager, Equipment Manufacturing)*
- *“We put KAM and sales management under one roof in order to reduce the tension and improve the cooperation. Therefore, both teams are managed by one director in order to guarantee that strategic and operational announcements result from one source.” (Me Stei, Key Account Manager, Pharmaceuticals)*

Thus, KA managers often simultaneously perceive themselves as differentiated from classical salespeople, yet they remain in contact with the sales function. In the light of identity research, this situation should be positive for KAM performance as well as the firm's market effectiveness. Steward et al. (2009, p. 464), building on Fisher et al. (1997), state that “strong identity with a functional area has been found to reduce the responsiveness to organizational norms that encourage communication across functions”. Our research suggests that KA managers may be aware of the necessity of maintaining an identity that allows communication across functions, in particular with the classical sales function.

## *5.2. 'Omnipresent in the organisation' Vs 'without specific ties'*

KAM implementation is a major challenge and requires a careful process of analysis and planning (Wengler et al., 2006, Leischnig et al., 2018). The second paradox that is noticeable in KA managers' discourse refers to an important implementation dimension, that is, where KA management is located within the supplier organization. Although many KAM entities (teams, departments, etc.) are located inside sales departments, regular references to a 'transversal' position are made.

The idea that – in the context of their job – KA managers relate to a large set of different internal organizational actors (such as individuals, departments, teams, etc.) was highlighted in the literature early on. For example, in their seminal article, Shapiro and Moriarty (1984) mention the variety of 'support systems' KA managers interact with. The cross-functional nature of KA teams that various scholars highlight (Atanasova & Senn, 2011; Davies & Ryals, 2009; Guesalagua et al., 2018; Homburg et al., 2002; Salojärvi & Saarenketo, 2013) relates to the idea of KA managers being in a transversal position (Pardo et al., 2013). While several of these authors have stressed the difficulty KA managers encounter when designing

and managing these teams (Guesalagua et al., 2018; Homburg et al., 2002) they have not specifically investigated the possible tensions – for the KA manager - that ‘being everywhere’ could cause.

‘Being transversal’, for the respondents in our study, seems to reconcile the perception of being ‘nowhere’ (not precisely located in the organization chart) with the idea of being everywhere (able to navigate throughout the organization), and thus able to get in touch with everyone in the organization.

— *“Everything’s vertical in an organization, but my mission is totally transversal.”*  
(Mr Poin, Key Account Manager, Equipment Manufacturing)

KA managers comment on the absence of a strong attachment to the different functions or units they work with. Rather, they depict themselves as loners:

— *“I am really a free electron. Being a bit of a nomad. And I confess that I like it very much. Because I am autonomous.”* (Mr Poin, Key Account Manager, Equipment Manufacturing)  
— *“We are satellites in the organization.”* (Mr Meyn, Key Account Manager, Equipment Manufacturing)

Yet, KA managers say that they have broad information, encompassing aspects that are related to many areas inside the firm and in the customer company they are in charge of:

— *“Whenever I need something, I gather the information, and I always get what I need.”* (Mr Keht, Key account manager, Pharmaceuticals)  
— *“It’s a spider web with the KA manager in the middle.”* (Mr Meun, Key account Manager, Chemicals)  
— *“We are really at the crossroads of the company.”* (Mr Chris, Key Account Manager, Pharmaceuticals)

Overall, this identity opposition allows for flexibility and adaptability in the work of the KA manager. Given that formalization has been found to have a highly significant negative impact on KAM performance (Workman et al., 2003), this part of KA managers’ identity should represent a mechanism that helps KA managers achieve both their objectives in improving the relationship for the KA and their own performance objectives.

### 5.3. 'Internal' Vs 'external'

References to, on the one hand, the outside (i.e., the KA customer and the overall 'environment') and, on the other hand, the inside (i.e., their company) are strongly present in KA managers' discourse:

— *"As a KA manager in our business you need a third of your working hours to prepare your contacts and customer visits, a third of your working hours you spend outside the company and at the customer's company, and a third of your working hours for the follow up of the customer visit."* (Mr Glat, Key Account Manager, Pharmaceuticals)

The KAM literature makes reference in different ways to the idea of a KA manager belonging both to an external and internal network. According to Guenzi et al. (2007) KA managers should be 'both internally and externally oriented' (p. 124). Authors emphasize this 'double orientation' and the multiplicity of relationships, for example, Homburg et al. (2002) see two main dimensions in KA managers' activities, that is, 'internal coordination' versus 'external interaction with customers' (p. 44). Harvey et al. (2002) comment on the difficulty for KA managers to manage 'between organizations' (p. 643), which means having both cooperation / collaboration tasks with their key customers *and* within their organization in the key account team. The idea of a KA manager orchestrating a network of 'firm-internal actors as well as a network of actors' (Ivens et al., 2018, p. 46) has largely been promoted by Ivens et al (2016) and Pardo (1999). Very recently, Gupta et al. (2019) have again specifically explored those 'internal and external KAM interactions' (p. 109) through the notions of 'intrafirm' and 'interfirm' networks (p. 108). Yet, whilst the reference to 'outside' and 'inside' managerial tasks is regularly mentioned, it has never been raised as an identity issue. Analysing our data, it seems that referring to the 'inside/outside' opposites allows KA managers to build their role as boundary spanners, yet it raises the issue of who they consider they work for (in their own perception).



The proximity to the customer is thus carefully assessed: Close enough to be the one actor with overarching knowledge of the customer and contacts in the customer organization:

— *“At the beginning I had 2 contacts at the customer. At the end I had 100!” (Mr Rena, Key Account Manager, Technology)*

In many cases this implies that the KA manager is the only actor in such a situation. Yet, in order to avoid being suspected to be exclusively or too strongly on the customer’s side, he/she can’t be too close to the KA:

— *“We know the customer very well. You become the client’s lawyer... which you are sometimes accused of.” (Mr Rena, Key Account Manager, Technology)*

So, the KA manager emphasizes a certain ability to ‘resist’ the customer:

— *“We were ready to tell them ‘we stop everything’. We don’t deliver anymore! Find another supplier! Well, there they had to think internally and say they had to win to work with us on innovation and let go on prices.” (Mr Meun, Key Account Manager, Chemicals)*

The antagonism created by these two strong opposite poles (i.e., the customer *and* the company; or, the outside *and* the inside) cannot be relieved by favouring one or the other partner in the relationship, but, rather, by describing a possible balance between the two, which appears only to be describable in quasi-spiritual terms:

— *“A word to summarize my mission, I would reply to the Chinese ‘the invariable medium’. This represents a little balance between the internal and the external. This is in the Chinese sense of the term. I am able to be close to one side as I am able to be on the other side, to be on the outside, to have the two points of view.” (Mr Bera, Key Account Manager, Technology)*

This element of a KA manager’s identity is important for his/her performance because in order to create value in the longer term and in the sense of relational norms such as mutuality or solidarity (Macneil, 1980) between supplier and KA, the KA manager must find the right balance between the interests of both sides.

#### 5.4. 'Close to top management' Vs 'close to low hierarchical levels'

Here we refer to the challenge that KA managers face in being not just boundary-spanners between their firm and the KA, but at the same time needing to span hierarchies (Foss et al., 2013), both within their firm and the KA firm. In fact, the levels of contact KA managers have, both internally and externally, often encompass the whole hierarchical range inside the respective organisations, that is, it reaches from the top management teams inside their own firm and inside the KA firm all the way down to numerous operative units in both firms. On the external side, this is reflected in a discourse in which KA managers describe the span of their contacts within customer companies from the very bottom (the workshop manager) to the very top (the CEO):

- *"I work frequently, two or three times a month, with research directors at the customer's. It's not just anyone, you have people who manage three or four thousand people and budgets of 2, 3 or 5 billion. You have in front of you decision-makers who ask to have in front of them decision-makers". (Mr Scha, Key Account Manager, Pharmaceuticals)*
- *"I remember wearing overalls and going with the handler to go and sort steel plates at a customer subcontractor." (Mr Gall, Key Account Manager, Equipment Manufacturing)*

The literature discusses this issue and suggests that such a vertical span of contacts with actors on both sides (a) provides a broad understanding of the customer as a whole (i.e., processes, motivations, needs, etc.) (Guenzi & Storbacka, 2015), (b) provides the opportunity to observe specific customer behaviours that the supplier could respond to with specific offers (Kempenars & Van der Hart, 1999), and (c), in its firm-internal dimension, ensures that KA managers and their teams receive the necessary support to signal the importance attributed to the KAs and to KAM across all hierarchical levels (Homburg et al., 2002).

The KA managers interviewed for this study make reference to this 'in between' position at the level of their own organization. They describe their position as being located 'between' the top and the bottom levels of their own and, to a certain extent, their KA's organisations

and see themselves able, as a consequence, to function as a strong informal link between different hierarchical levels:

- *“I can call the girl from logistics and ask her ‘can you help me which such or such document for [name of the key account] I’ve got no problem to ask any department for support.’” (Mr Poin, Key Account Manager, Equipment Manufacturing)*
- *“I can call the VP of a subsidiary if I need him!” (Mr Majc, Key Account Manager Equipment Manufacturing)*
- *“I’m bringing the CEO to visit [name of the key account customer] and he asks me ‘what do you want to tell the customer’.” (Mr Loct, Key Account Manager, Equipment Manufacturing)*

As such, the key account manager is able to coordinate different parts of the company:

- *“I know every part of my company. I’m facilitating and coordinating.” (Mr Koff, Key Account Manager, Pharmaceuticals)*
- *“My job is at the crossroads of countries and units.” (Mr Lafa, Key Account Manager, Telecoms)*
- *“I’m activating the relevant levers; I’m connecting the right people.” (Mr Thom, Key Account Manager, Pharmaceuticals)*

These statements tally with empirical findings that both top management support for KA managers and KA manager access to actors and resources inside their firm are positively related to KAM effectiveness and, in turn, to their company’s performance in the market (Workman et al., 2003).

However, the extant literature does not link this issue, that is, the vertical span of KA managers’ levels of interaction, to the identity work required from KA managers when interacting with actors who are at different hierarchical levels both internally and on the side of the KA. Yet, this paradox provides a good example of how several different identities may be required and, hence, emerge through the work of a KA manager. The way the KA manager interacts with the above-cited “girl from logistics”, what he represents for her and how he believes he should be perceived by her will vary as compared to the relevant

identities in interactions with the CEO of the same firm, a purchasing manager at the KA firm, or the CEO of the KA firm.

### 5.5. *'Taking strategic decisions' Vs 'managing operational aspects'*

The strategic / operational paradox refers to the character of the tasks KA managers fulfil. The wide set of responsibilities KA managers have comprises aspects that differ in terms of their time horizon, their impact on the performance of the firm, and the resource requirements they imply. Strategy has been described as “a description of what an organization is trying to accomplish and to what ends it is channelling its critical resources and problem-solving energies. As such, it may be regarded as a set of goals and policies, as a way of structuring an ill-structured situation, or as an allocation of resources” (Rumelt, 1979, p. 199). KAM is strategic in nature in the sense that it is concerned with managing an organisation’s most strategically important customers (Ivens et al., 2018). It may represent one of a firm’s most important capabilities. At the same time, KAM always needs to integrate its own activities into the overarching strategy of the firm (Guenzi & Storbacka, 2015). The latter requires that KA managers interact closely with the firm’s “strategy makers” in the context of what is labelled “strategy as practice” (Golsorkhi et al., 2010). Operational aspects of KAM, on the other side, concern small entities of KA-related activity conducted in short-term timelines, with restricted resource usage, and concrete steps (Zupancic, 2008; Marcos-Cuevas et al., 2014). They take place under the lead, coordination and responsibility of KA managers, but may involve activities conducted by other individuals and units.

This study finds that KA managers are highly aware of the strategic component their job encompasses:

— *“The job is interesting for many reasons. But first, it is important for the company. It’s strategic. And I love being in a strategic position!” (Mr Thoma, Key Account Manager, Transportation)*

- *“Key account managers are the real CEO of the relationship with their key account customers.” (Mr Loct, Key Account Manager, Equipment Manufacturing)*
- *“I’m crucial for the company. I won’t tell you that I can do whatever I want, but [...].”(Mr Thom, Key Account Manager, Pharmaceuticals)*
- *“What I appreciate is having access to high-level decisions. The level where, when you say something, you can do it!” (Mr Stej, Key Account Manager, Pharmaceuticals)*

At the same time, the KA managers also describe aspects of their job that are more short-term oriented, tactical, and imply fewer critical resources. Such aspects encompass setting short-term objectives, negotiating with customers, managing internal contacts, trouble-shooting and the like. All these aspects reflect the operational dimension of KA managers’ identity:

- *“Once you have defined KAM in a company, the next step is to involve it in the operative processes.” (Mr Brun, Key Account Manager, Pharmaceuticals)*
- *“I am entrepreneurially-minded. I’m not doing PowerPoint slideshows. I’m in the value proposition.” (Mr Loct, Key Account Manager, Equipment Manufacturing)*
- *“You’ve got to have a precise idea of the contract reality.” (Mr Glat, Key Account Manager, Pharmaceuticals)*

Sengupta et al. (2000) discuss this challenge for KA managers. These authors qualify KA managers as both ‘thinkers’ and ‘doers’ (p. 258), which highlights that while KA managers are ‘strategic thinkers capable of analysing the long-term interests of their organization’s most important customers’, they also need to ‘have excellent implementation skills’ to get things done. Davies and Ryals (2009) see both aspects as so intertwined that they do not separate them out in their analysis.

In the present research, several of the KA managers interviewed refer to these two aspects of management:

- *“What I found interesting is decision and action. It’s just like with guys in politics who say that the best position is the one of a mayor: you take the decision and you see the action the same day. It’s the same. And this is what I love.” (Mr Poin, Key Account Manager, Equipment Manufacturing)*

- *“Operational business is all the stuff that comes in every day. Sometimes this can be 100% when everything comes together. Normally, from the strategic aspect, I am a ‘long-term thinking person’. Also, I am not triggered by short term incentives, but oriented toward a long-term cooperation and success.”*  
(Mr Roes, Key Account Manager, Pharmaceuticals)

Establishing the link between strategic decisions and operative processes is an important element of KA managers’ identity because it contributes to establishing and maintaining the comprehensive view of the customer relationship that is at the very heart of the KAM concept (Storbacka, 2012; Ivens et al., 2016). Yet, the existing literature does not discuss the possible interplay between strategic and operational aspects in KA managers’ identities, that is, how they make sense of their role as resource integrators in complex B2B ecosystems. Their identity will most often represent a mix of both aspects, but in certain situations (i.e., in dyadic exchange with certain actors) one will prevail and in other situations the other will take on more importance.

#### *5.6. ‘Supported by the entire company’ Vs ‘providing support to the entire company’*

KA managers describe themselves as being ‘served’ by others in the sense that they rely on others to build and manage a value-creative relationship with their KA customers. These ‘others’ represent valuable resources for the purpose of managing the KA (Homburg et al., 2002). Richards and Jones (2009) interpret this support as the “extent to which a KAM can obtain needed resources from his or her organization to support the focal account.” (p. 314). In fact, the company as a whole needs to support the KA manager in working with important accounts. Moon and Armstrong (1994) indicate that each team selling effort requires a coordinator who is able to identify and obtain the resources needed to support the customer. KAMs have to look across their organization to find resources to support their accounts.

At the same time, KA managers can be seen as service providers both to their KA customer and to other actors inside their own firm (Ivens et al., 2015). They may help actors on both sides of the supplier-KA dyad identify the right interlocutors, facilitate contacts, take over tasks, provide advice and so on. As such, their role is truly twofold.

This is reflected in the statements of our respondents. ‘Others serve me, and I serve others’, summarizes the attitude of KA managers. Many of them insist on how other departments represent resources that they need to manage in an efficient way:

- *“A key account manager is important. But without a team: you’re nothing!” (Mr Rena, Key Account Manager, Technology)*
- *“All resources are at their disposal. If ever I call the boss for India saying (name of the key account) is going to build a plant in your area. Are you ready? He will never dismiss me!” (Mr Loct, Key Account Manager, Equipment Manufacturing)*
- *“In my daily routine work I can do a pretty good job without many departments, but some of them I need very desperately. If I want to make a brilliant job, I need quite a bit of them.” (Mr Weru, Key Account Manager, Pharmaceuticals)*

At the same time, while relying on others’ resources, the KA managers explain how they help others. These others (i.e., other functions, regions, or individuals) throughout the company rely on the KA manager with his/her skills and detailed information. Nätti et al. (2006) refer to this as the “linking pin” role of KA managers. One respondent in our research stated:

- *“At the region levels, when the customer asks, ‘have you ever developed such an application?’ Sometimes they don’t know how to answer! They say no! The key account manager, he knows.” (Mrs De Got, Key Account Manager, Telecom)*

This internal situation of mutual dependence between KA managers and other functions or actors shows that more traditional views of KAM as a totally and exclusively customer focused concept may not represent reality entirely accurately. Or at least, such a view is not in line with KA managers’ identity perceptions as collected through this research. The focus of KA managers’ activity is also quite strongly on the internal network, which means any

employee within the supplier company who could bring their expertise to build the relationship with a customer (Ivens et al., 2016). For example, the ambassador role KA managers exert inside their own firm as representatives of their KA (Mahlamäki et al., 2018) can be seen as a service function of the KA manager toward stakeholders inside the supplier's organisation. The KA manager offers the actors of the internal network the 'broad view' of the key account:

— *"We are here to tell them 'you should know that there is a world beyond your business before making a fuss with the customer'" (Mr Lafa, Key Account Manager, Telecoms)*

This element of KA managers' identity is important because, against the background of their lack of hierarchical power, the perception that they can create value for internal actors inside their company helps them mobilize internal resources through a mechanism of reciprocity (Marcos-Cuevas et al., 2014).

To summarize, each of the six identity paradoxes discussed above can be illustrated with narratives that are representative of how KA managers envision their identity. While each of the six paradoxes has been mentioned in the extant KAM literature before, this research provides a comprehensive framework of the paradoxical KA manager identity that integrates hitherto more isolated considerations. The following discussion section explores the *paradoxical* character of these six elements in more detail.

## **6. Discussion**

Our objective in this study was to investigate how KA managers - a specific type of boundary-spanning sales actor who works within a network of different internal and external relationships - makes sense of their role as a resource integrator in complex B2B ecosystems.



The previous section has shown that KA managers' identity perceptions encompass six paradoxical dimensions. In this section, we discuss how opposites<sup>2</sup> in each of these KAM paradoxes are reconciled and aligned.

There are several approaches actors can use to deal with paradoxes (Lewis, 2000). Actors confronted with paradoxes can either *avoid* them; they can *confront* them by discussing the underlying tensions that create the paradox and thus "escape the paralysis" (Lewis, 2000, p. 764); and they can *transcend* them by accepting them and by starting to "think paradoxically" (Lewis, 2000, p. 764).

### *6.1. Transcending the paradoxes*

We concur with Lewis (2000) in her idea of transcendence of paradoxes. From our view point, the KA managers in this study mostly think and act paradoxically. They view possible paradoxical tensions as complementary and interwoven (Lewis, 2000, p. 1999). In their discourse, KA managers show a high level of awareness of the multi-dimensional identity opposites that characterise their work. At the same time, many of them insist on the fact that this situation doesn't represent a fundamental problem or some sort of barrier to their work. In many ways, KA managers see themselves as spanning-actors in the sense that they need to span the opposites and potential tensions between the extremes on each one of the six paradoxes identified in their identity perceptions. Our research allows us to identify two types of discourse with respect to the six paradoxical dimensions. We refer to the first type as a BUT-type of discourse and to the second type as an AND-type of discourse.

In the first case, KA managers do not place themselves at a specific point along each of the six dimensions (be it at an extreme end or in an intermediate position). Rather, they intentionally occupy several positions, often changing the position they include in their

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<sup>2</sup> By using the term *opposites* we refer to Lewis (2000, p. 761) and the vantage point that 'contradictory yet interwoven elements' constitute a paradox.

identity depending on the actor(s) they need to interact with. This spanning capability strongly defines their identity. We refer to this type of discourse as a BUT-type of discourse.

- For instance, in the ‘sales / not sales’ opposition, KA managers stress the specificity of their work and mission (as compared to traditional salespeople and other actors involved in traditional sales, in particular regarding the time frame that guides their work). Yet, they insist on the idea that this does not prevent them from working with the salespeople whenever this is required and that enabling and achieving sales with KA customers is part of their mission.
- In the ‘nowhere / everywhere’ opposition, KA managers acknowledge and emphasize their ‘fuzzy’ position in the organizational chart. They perceive this position as being rather unique, but they perceive this to be a requirement in order to achieve the necessary ‘transversality’ that enables alignment and, thus, represents an asset.

For other opposites between which KA managers navigate, the discourse is rather one of ‘integration’. KA managers describe situations where opposites are seen as reconcilable, or more precisely, they present a discourse where *they*, as KA managers, symbolise the reconciliation of the opposites. In order to contrast this with the first type of discourse, we refer to this perspective as an AND-type of discourse. It is represented in several of the oppositions we identified:

- In the ‘internal / external’ paradox, KA managers talk about their proximity to the KA customer (essential for building strong customer intelligence) along with a resistance to possible pressures exerted by this customer.
- In the ‘top / bottom’ opposition, KA managers describe their contacts (both within their own firm and their KA) as spanning the whole organization from top management to the lowest levels within hierarchical structures.

- In the ‘strategic / operational’ opposition, KA managers insist on their ability to be involved with both ‘decision’ and ‘action’. They state that their mission offers them the opportunity to manage a relationship as a ‘whole’, from strategic intent, through implementation, to control of results.
- In the ‘supported / supportive’ opposition, the KA managers cleverly build their position as being one ‘in support’ of others. Traditionally, KA managers are seen as demanding additional resources and deviations from standard operating procedures for their KA customers. Here, this perspective is balanced by identifying what KA managers can bring to others, that is, how they create value for other actors inside their organisation.

Figure 2 represents the different dimensions of the identity of KA managers.

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Insert Figure 2 about here

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## *6.2. The KA manager as a paradoxical actor in the organisation*

The identity of KA managers, that is, how they make sense of their role as resource integrators in complex B2B ecosystems, doesn’t rely on excluding or including themselves from or in another group, as is the case for the marketing managers studied by Ellis and Ybema (2010). Rather, they build their identity as a matter of ‘distance’. All their efforts seem to concentrate on the question of how much ‘distance / closeness’ to maintain with the two opposites of the paradoxes that we describe. Being far away allows differentiation; being

close allows integration. The BUT- and the AND-types of discourse represent coping strategies within this identity work.

With the BUT-type of discourse, the KA managers prevent possible negative consequences of too much or insufficient distance. With the AND-approach, KA managers choose equidistance to the opposites, or rather, merge them into something that transcends them (Lewis, 2000). By so doing (rather than expressing inclusion / exclusion relative to groups they are in contact with), they eventually appear as being able to be everywhere and do everything. Given the fact that KA managers are in charge of relationships that are difficult to predict and forecast, this type of identity gives them latitude to be (and thus do) whatever is necessary to support the evolution of relationships at the moment these evolutions occur.

Furthermore, it appears that with BUT as well as with AND types of discourse, KA managers do not need to refer to negative identities. When they differentiate themselves from other identities (e.g., from the identity of salespeople, or from the identity of top managers, etc.), they don't have to emphasize negative aspects of those other positions. Or in other words, KA managers do not build an anti-identity, as Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003) describe in their work, where metaphorization of existing positions is used to build who someone is and who he/she is not. We don't find evidence for such a perspective in our qualitative data. This may be explained by the fact that any mention of negative identity aspects perceived by KA managers in other internal or external actors would be detrimental to the coordinating role KA managers need to play in inter-organizational relationships. For instance, if a KA manager builds his/her own identity by building a negative identity opposed to the sales force, it will be very difficult to gain the necessary support from salespeople.

Finally, it appears that KA managers' identity can be seen as constituted of fragments of identities, but fragments that hold strongly together. By navigating between the opposites, the KA managers build their identity, taking aspects of different identities that result in a

fragmented but coherent identity. As such, this fragmented identity is not comfortable. Thus, KA managers rebuild this identity as a whole through the BUT- and AND-discourses they use. Consequently, KA managers' identity is no longer highly fragmented (Brown, 2015). It is made of identity fragments (stemming from different organizational and individual identities) that, if not fully contradictory, can be mutually kept in balance (for instance, managing the internal AND the external network; being able to marshal resources BUT with no hierarchical power, etc.). By doing so, KA managers are not 'solving paradoxes'. Rather, it is because of the very existence of these opposites that KA managers successfully build an idiosyncratic identity. In some ways, they *use* the paradoxes. They render them visible (in their discourse) and thus highlight the task of reconciling them. KA managers transform the opposites of the paradoxes into something that has value for their own identity, as well as for the relationship that they are responsible for. Seen through the lens of the Japanese *kinsugi* art (inspired by the *wabi-sabi* philosophy of imperfection) that focuses on repairing ceramics with gold dust in order to enhance cracks and give pieces more value, KA managers accept that cracks and repairs are parts of the history of an object (here, a relationship), rather than something to hide.

## **7. Contributions and avenues for further research**

In this research, we focus on the role of KA managers as 'ecosystem orchestrators'. Such a role supposes that KA managers are involved in bonding with a set of different heterogeneous actors (different relationships with individuals and organizational units), a potential source of discomfort. We use the identity concept to study how KA managers make sense of their role as resource integrators in complex B2B ecosystems and how they cope with the heterogeneity surrounding their activities. The empirical data gathered reveals six paradoxes in which KA

managers operate using either a BUT- or an AND-type of discourse. What are the theoretical and managerial implications?

### *7.1. Theoretical contributions*

First, in B2B marketing and sales, the field of inter-organizational relationship research has a long tradition. A broad stream of literature exists that encompasses different theoretical lenses, empirical approaches, and fundamental research paradigms (e.g., Möller and Wilson, 1995; Lambe et al., 2001). B2B relationship research covers areas such as buyer-seller relationships, channel relationships, and strategic alliances. An important part of this inter-organizational relationship research focuses on inter-organizational exchange in which sociological constructs, such as trust in or commitment to organizations and sub-units, are studied as they occur between groups of people (Wilke and Ritter, 2006; Morgan and Hunt, 1994). Another part of extant inter-organizational relationship research in marketing and sales focuses on the role of individuals and studies constructs that often have their roots in sociology or psychology, such as attitudes, motivation, satisfaction, or, again, trust and commitment (e.g., Davies and Ryals, 2013; Jones et al., 1996). Many of these constructs describe how an actor, such as a KA manager, perceives exchange partners, that is, how the KA manager relates to other actors through emotions, cognitions, or behavioural intentions. Our research on KA manager identity aims to fill a gap in the literature by focusing on self-perception, as opposed to the perception of others. This research assumes that self-perception and the perception of others (e.g., Markus et al. 1985) are both important factors that influence dependent variables such as behaviours and performance.

Identity-related research hasn't received much scholarly interest in inter-organizational relationship studies. Instead of speculating about the reasons for this limited amount of scholarly attention, this research paper - using a qualitative research approach - suggests that

identity as a construct deserves more attention from KAM researchers. There are two reasons for this. First, identity occupies the central place in the chain of constructs that affect individual behaviours, dyadic and multilateral interactions between individuals, dyadic and multilateral interactions between organizations (e.g., Tajfel, 1974; Stedman, 2002), and, in turn, the economic performance of firms. Second, the broad range of issues in inter-organizational relationships (e.g., Corsten et al., 2011) or KAM that are related to identity. These encompass the identity work that KA managers need to perform and also possible approaches to identity regulation for KA managers, both from within their own firm or the KA firm.

The six paradoxes that KA managers respond to through two strategies (BUT- and AND-types of discourse) may serve as important building blocks in future KAM research. As argued above, extant KAM research has evoked many of the issues encompassed by the six paradoxes, but in a rather fragmented way. This research integrates these elements from prior research on the basis of the 42 interviews conducted. This allows us to add a framework to KAM research that completes the broader stream of research on how KA managers perceive other actors in inter-organisational relationships by adding a comprehensive perspective of self-perception dimensions. Scholars may now draw upon this framework to either include all or selected aspects in future research.

Our work also extends the research on relationship managers conducted by Ellis and Ybema (2010). These authors argue that KA managers build their identity on the basis of an inclusion / exclusion system. According to these authors, KA managers position themselves either as internal or external (inside or outside the organization, the market, the relationship or their field of expertise). Such an understanding of the KA manager and his/her identity suggests that these actors need to make exclusive choices that will impact their work and their relationships with other actors. Our work shows that rather than excluding or including

(themselves and others), the identity work of KA managers operates by creating a new position reference that reconciles oppositions. Such an inclusive mind-set is fundamentally different because it aims at linking rather than separating. It stresses the perspective that the KA manager represents an important cog in the actor network in which he/she operates (e.g., Ivens et al., 2016) and doesn't need to take sides. To refer back to Ellis and Ybema's words (2010), we would say that KA managers present themselves as being *both* on the inside and the outside. This finding extends the existing theoretical perspective on KA managers and opens up avenues for future research.

## *7.2. Managerial contributions*

Inter-organizational relationships are a phenomenon of fundamental importance for any firm. Firms act in markets that are often described as networks, ecosystems or at least as value chains. At the interface with customer firms, supplier firms, service provider firms, or alliance partner firms, KA managers play a key role in keeping their company aligned with its relationship partners and in developing these inter-organizational relationships in order to adapt to the strategic changes in their company's environment. As a consequence, KA managers are key actors for the future of their firms. Understanding how KA managers perceive their role and their place both inside their firm and in the inter-organizational relationships is of strategic importance. Board members, managers who head KAM programs, as well as HR departments should devote attention to KA managers' identities and their identity work. Our research extends the existing literature and provides managerially relevant insights. This study has at least three main implications for the practice of KAM.

Firstly, an important characteristic of KA managers' identity is that it helps KA managers develop a clearer understanding of their role. This is an essential step in translating formal role descriptions (which may or may not exist in written form in firms practicing KAM) into



effective and efficient KAM work inside an organisation (that is, achieving the goals that an organisation pursues through KAM). In order to perform well, KA managers need this translation process (Abratt and Kelly, 2002; Piercy and Lane, 2006). The role of a KA manager is often non-intuitive to other actors (Wilson and Woodburn, 2014), that is, they do not understand fully who KA managers are supposed to be and how they work (which is perhaps not so surprising, given the paradoxes involved in KAM). Hence, KA managers need to constantly explain their work and objectives, which requires from them effective identity work. Their own identity work helps other actors inside the firm and in the customer firm to better grasp the KA manager role and the related tasks. The role of the KA manager encompasses frequent interaction with other actors. This situation requires a clear definition of roles (for example, by HR management or the head of the KAM program). But formal role descriptions can hardly include and interpret the very differentiated future challenges that await a KA manager. Hence, the KA manager's identity work needs to complement, interpret, and – where necessary – extend the definition of the formal role; in some ways this process is similar to the distinction between the use of formal (written) contracts and the function of relational norms to complement these formal contracts in the governance of inter-organizational relationships (Heide and John, 1992). For example, if the KA manager's role is too differentiated from a classical sales position in its tasks and responsibilities, then other actors may find it hard to work together with the KA manager or provide the right types of input and information. They may also question the value of the KA manager for the organization. If insufficiently differentiated, the position overlaps with other positions and this will likely give rise to doubts, competitive situations, and friction (for example, when the KA manager and certain salespeople are involved in the same inter-organizational relationships, selling to the same customer). As a consequence, the hierarchical levels that coordinate the KAM program, for example the KAM director, a KAM steering committee, or

the sales director, should carefully consider and monitor this tuning issue conducted by the KA manager through identity work in relation to the task and the degree of differentiation. This is not a matter of status, but a question of identity that can either inhibit or foster effective and efficient inter-organizational relationship management. Hence, those actors who are in charge of KAM, either as line managers or as representatives of the HR function, should proactively encourage and accompany the KA managers' identity work.

Secondly, building a strong identity is not a question of 'opposition'. A strong identity for KA managers is not built by defining negative identities. Managers should pay attention to communication as negative statements are unwelcome. Millman and Wilson (2014) evoke the case of "technological arrogance" of supplier firms towards customers. In a similar vein, negative statements made by KA managers about other departments that they work with internally - or other attitudes that express lack of respect for others - not only represent potential sources of conflict (Brady, 2004), but an issue of 'identity weakening'. KA managers should not build themselves *against* others. By doing so, they run the risk of making their own identity difficult to discern. Managers should pay particular attention to how KA managers position themselves toward the firm-internal network of actors (that is, the actors KA managers need to work with within their own company). The quality of internal relationships between KA managers and other departments (logistics, manufacturing, marketing, etc.) is an important prerequisite for successful KAM performance (Ivens et al., 2016). In particular, when inter-organizational relationships are established with strategic partners who are well-known companies with strong reputations, there is a risk that KA managers adopt careless or even contemptuous attitudes towards internal relationships that they judge less gratifying than external ones. KA managers should be irreproachable in terms of their conduct in this sense if they are to successfully build their own identity (Woodburn, 2006).

Thirdly, because KA managers' identities are central to their work and performance, this should represent a key consideration in recruitment situations and in regular talks between superiors and KA managers, and HR and KA managers. HR research suggests that an individual's ability to embrace and accept a paradoxical identity is a core skill or characteristic that will facilitate their work at the numerous interfaces they need to connect with (Aust et al., 2015). It is a characteristic that deviates from classical skills that are evaluated in job interviews, assessment centres, or similar situations, such as technical know-how, language skills, or soft skills. However, many line managers in leadership positions may have little experience with regard to identity issues and, hence, would require training themselves. As a consequence, firms should aim to increase awareness levels with regard to the importance and challenges of identity management and identity work among senior managers.

### *7.3 Limitations and avenues for future research*

We acknowledge several limitations that need to be taken into account when interpreting our findings. Several of these limitations offer starting points or springboards to future research. First, the findings result from qualitative case analysis. The case companies operate in two specific national environments, that is, Germany and France, and only cover six different activity sectors. Given this context, we stress the exploratory nature of our research and suggest that future research extends both the range of industry contexts studied, as well as its geographic range. The second aspect appears particularly important because the identity concept, as manifested in managers' self-perceptions is, in many ways, interrelated with cultural concepts, such as organizational culture, societal beliefs, or national culture (Sinha et al., 2001).

Second, empirical research on the role of actors in KAM doesn't always achieve consistent results. For example, in their study on drivers of KAM effectiveness, Workman and colleagues (2003) find that KAM team esprit de corps is the antecedent variable with the strongest influence while there is no significant influence of the use of teams in KAM on KAM effectiveness. Research that attempts to take a more detailed look at actor-related issues has started to examine what leads KA managers to develop certain attitudes and show certain behaviours, such as sportsmanship, or altruism. While, for example, Guenzi and colleagues (2007) find that a firm adopting a relational selling strategy fosters some of these behaviours or attitudes, both their own and other extant studies don't provide sufficient evidence to explain a broader set of such behavioural and attitudinal constructs. We suggest that KA managers' identity – as operationalized through the six dimensions we find – may contribute to a deeper understanding of the formation of KA manager attitudes and behaviours, and of actor-related issues in general. Hence, future research should study this specific link empirically.

A third direction for future research relates to the question of how aware KA managers actually are of their identity and how awareness of identity may influence their behaviours and performance. For example, the literature on mindfulness suggests that individuals have different levels of awareness of themselves and their role in society in general, as well as in the workplace (Bishop et al., 2004). Empirical evidence suggests that higher levels of mindfulness have a positive effect on job satisfaction, performance, and other work-related variables (Reb et al., 2015). Other research shows that mindfulness can influence identity (Weger et al., 2012). For example, as individuals become mindful, they focus their attention in the present, leading to emergence of a so-called 'experiential self' that witnesses present-moment "thoughts, feelings, and body states" (Farb et al., 2007, pp. 314-315). Such changes in identity may reduce factors such as stress or attachment to past states in rapidly changing

environments. Against this background, we believe that future research should provide us with a deeper understanding of how identity is actually shaped or influenced.

Fourth, our study focuses on KA managers as a specific case of relationship managers. We believe that KA managers are in many ways useful and important individuals for the purpose of our study, because, for example, they are in charge of customers who have strategic importance for the supplier firms and, thus, understanding KA managers' identity issues has high managerial relevance. However, findings may be different where customers represent different types of challenges or have different levels of customer value for the supplier firm. Hence, future research could investigate inter-organizational relationship identities in other types of buyer-seller relationships, for example, in field sales teams, customer service departments, or agile sales teams. Similarly, expanding the research to positions in fields such as purchasing (e.g., key supplier managers) or alliance management may provide interesting additional insights.

Fifth, the database of empirical results available within the field of KAM is still relatively limited and quantitative research allowing testing of causal relationships remains scarce. In their review of empirical approaches used in extant KAM studies, Guesalaga and Johnston (2010) show that out of 79 empirical articles the largest proportion relied upon qualitative analysis or descriptive statistics. Thus, as compared to many phenomena studied, for example, in organizational research, predictions about if-then-relationships in KAM are hardly available. We believe that this may be seen as an encouragement for scholars. It doesn't necessarily imply the use of large samples, for example for structural equation modelling. Increasingly, methods allowing analyses of small samples are now available, which is an advantage in fields such as KAM where collecting data represents a challenge. For example, qualitative comparative analysis (e.g., Fiss 2007, 2011; Leischnig et al. 2014) provides interesting opportunities. Among other possibilities, it allows performing contrarian

case analysis to analyse whether opposite relationships may occur for cases from the same sample, that is, X relates to Y positively, negatively and not at all in the same set of data - even when the main effect of X on Y is positive and substantial (Ordanini et al., 2013). Equifinality as a potentially relevant phenomenon in KAM may also be studied through qualitative comparative analysis. Hence, future research may consider applying complexity theory and configural analysis to gain a deeper and richer perspective on data than we currently have in quantitative studies on KAM (Woodside 2013, 2016). The six paradoxes identified in this research may constitute an appropriate field of study in the sense that KA managers may position themselves differently on the six dimensions. Different paradoxical configurations may, however, lead to similar outcomes.

Finally, our research also suggests that an investigation of the goal conflict in KAM concerning operational work and strategic goals on a process level could be an interesting avenue for future research, with the potential to enrich the KAM literature and illuminate a topic of high relevance for practitioners.

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Figure 1: building key account managers' narratives in six paradoxes

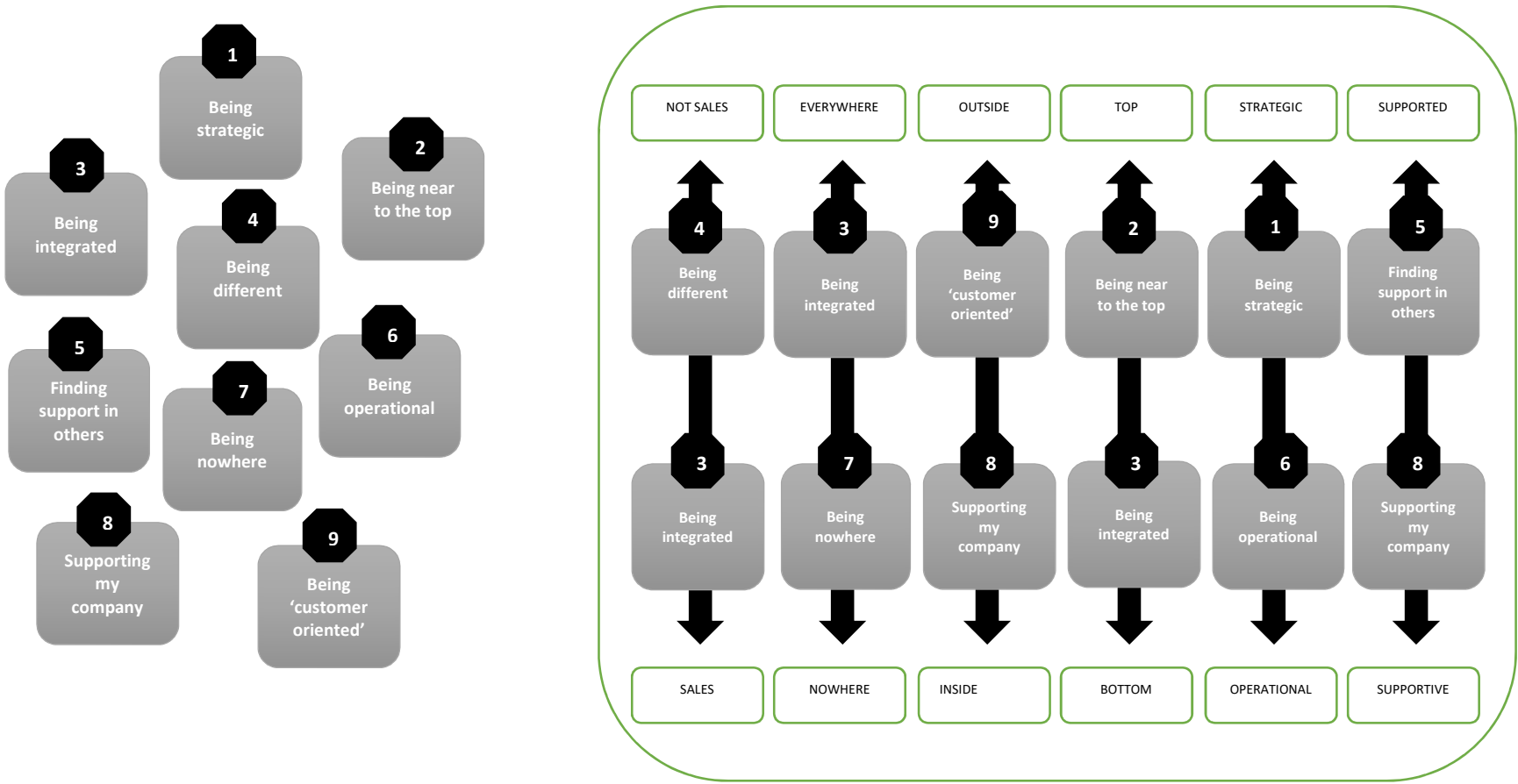


Figure 2: an integrated model of the dimensions of key account managers' identities

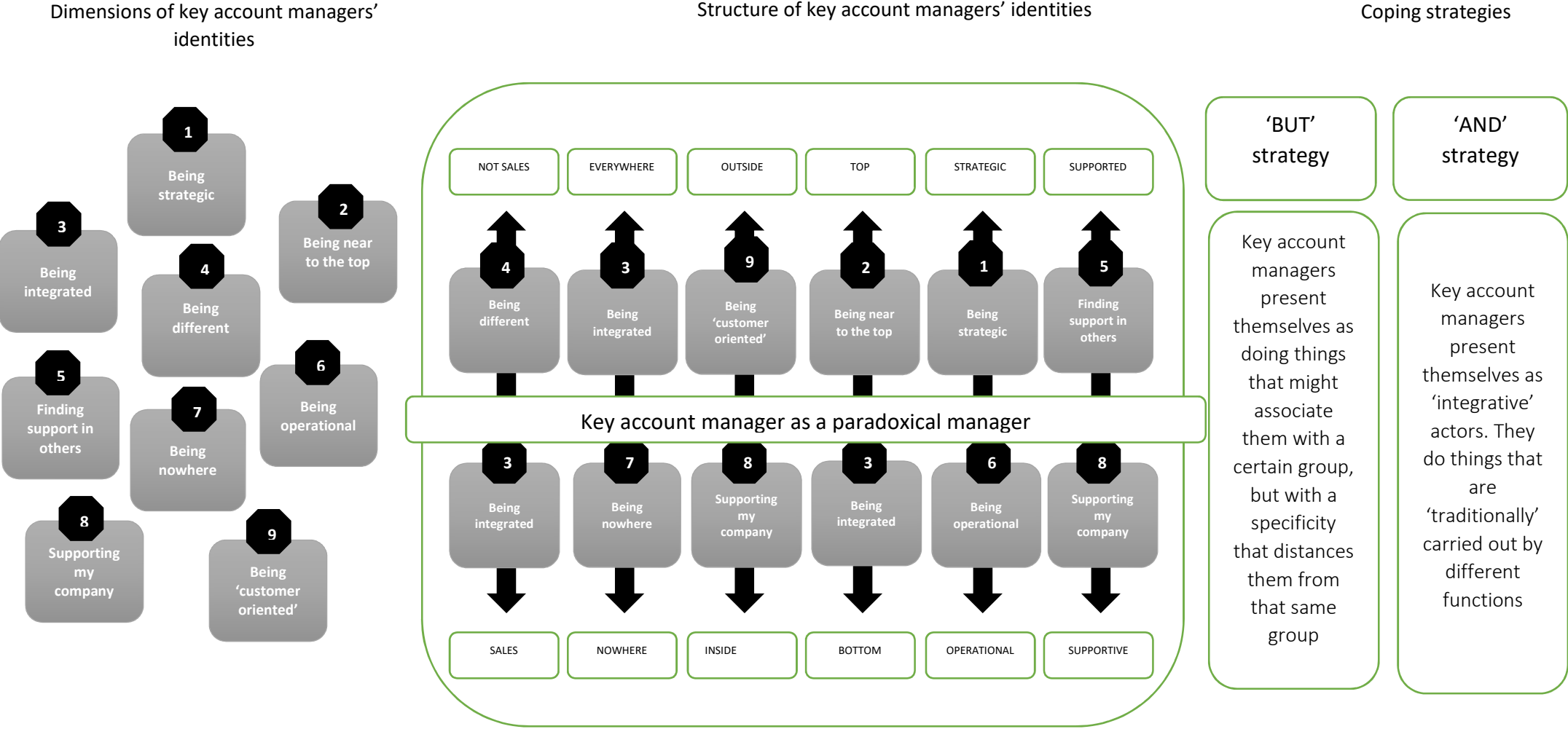


Table 1 – List of Respondents (Respondents' names have been anonymised)

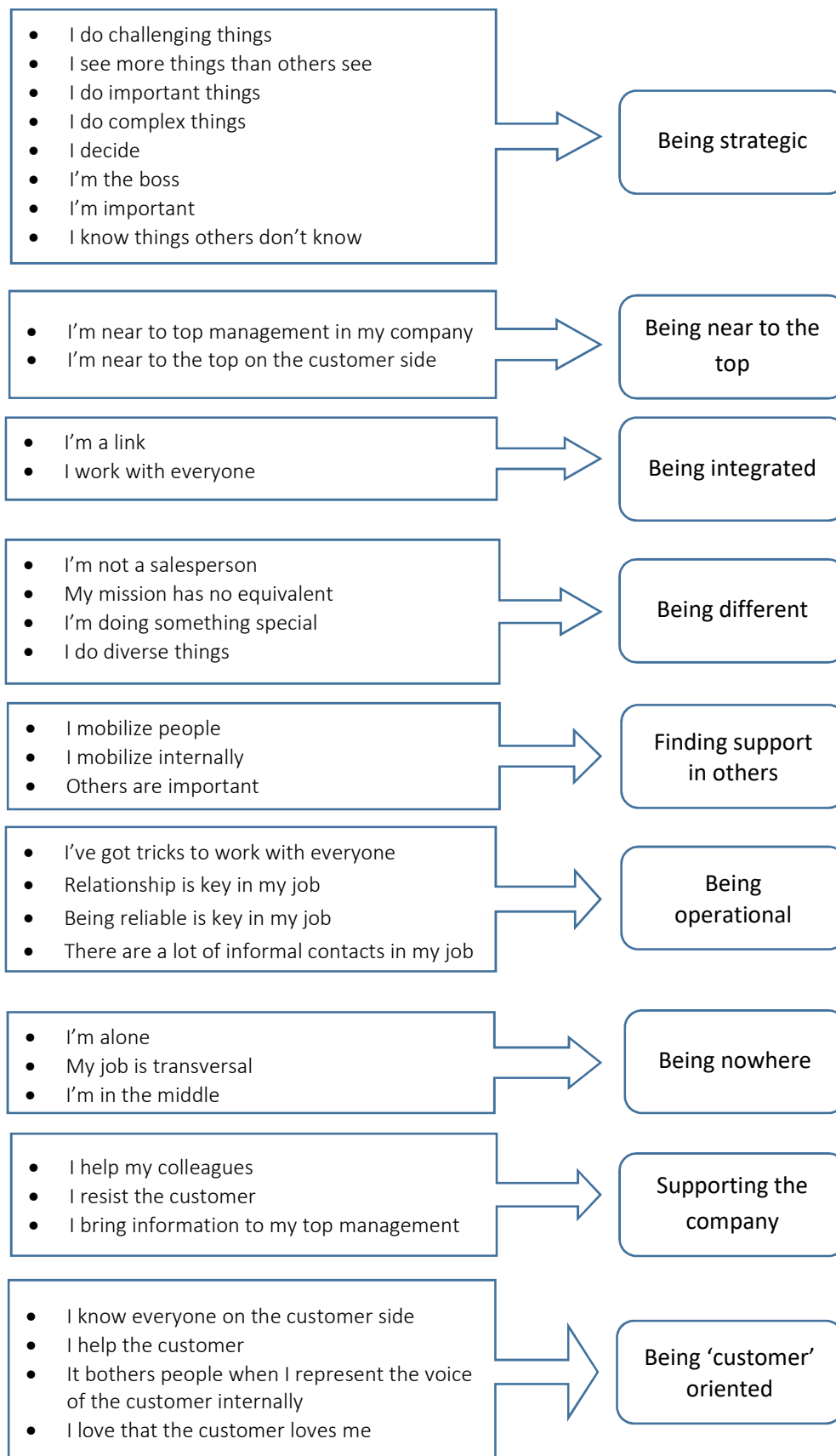
1	Mr BANG	Pharmaceuticals
2	Mr BERA	Technology
3	Mr BRUN	Pharmaceuticals
4	Mr CHAN	Equipment Manufacturing
5	Mr De SAIN	Energy & Utilities
6	Mr DJIA	Telecoms
7	Mr FAVR	Equipment Manufacturing
8	Mr FLAC	Equipment Manufacturing
9	Mr GILL	Equipment Manufacturing
10	Mr GLAT	Pharmaceuticals
11	Mr GUAR	Pharmaceuticals
12	Mr HENA	Pharmaceuticals
13	Mr KEHT	Pharmaceuticals
14	Mr KOFF	Pharmaceuticals
15	Mr LAFA	Telecoms
16	Mr LOCT	Equipment Manufacturing
17	Mr MAJC	Equipment Manufacturing
18	Mr MEUN	Energy & Utilities
19	Mr MEYN	Equipment Manufacturing
20	Mr MULL	Chemicals
21	Mr NICO	Telecoms
22	Mr POIN	Equipment Manufacturing
23	Mr RENA	Technology
24	Mr RUHL	Chemicals
25	Mr SCAP	Chemicals
26	Mr SCHA	Pharmaceuticals
27	Mr SCHA	Pharmaceuticals
28	Mr SCHE	Energy & Utilities
29	Mr SCHL	Pharmaceuticals
30	Mr SCHN	Pharmaceuticals
31	Mr SCHUB	Energy & Utilities
32	Mr STEI	Pharmaceuticals
33	Mr THOM	Pharmaceuticals
34	Mr THOMA	Transportation
35	Mr WAEC	Pharmaceuticals
36	Mr WERU	Pharmaceuticals
37	Mr. GALL	Equipment Manufacturing
38	Mrs CHRIS	Pharmaceuticals
39	Mrs De GOT	Telecoms
40	Mrs ROES	Pharmaceuticals
41	Mrs STRU	Pharmaceuticals
42	Mrs WEBE	Pharmaceuticals

**Table 2 – 1st-order analysis concepts**

1	I do a variety of things	18	I'm near to the top management in my company
2	I'm not really a salesperson	19	I bring information to my top management
3	My mission has no equivalent	20	I'm near to the top management on the customer side
4	I'm doing something special	21	I'm in the middle
5	I do challenging things	22	I'm a link
6	I see more things than others see	23	I help the customer
7	I do important things	24	I help my colleagues
8	I do complex things	25	I love that the customer loves me!
9	I decide	26	I resist the customer
10	I'm the boss	27	It bothers people when I represent the voice of the customer internally
11	I'm important	28	I know everyone on the customer side
12	I'm alone	229	I know things others don't know
13	My job is transversal	30	Others are important
14	I mobilize people	31	Being reliable is key in my job
15	I mobilize internally	32	Relationship is key in my job
16	I work with every one	33	There are a lot of informal contacts in my job
17	I've got tricks to work with everyone		



**Table 3 – Data Structure**



**Table 4 - Description of the second-order analysis themes**

Being strategic	Key account managers deal with different strategic aspects: What is the nature of the relationship with a key account customer? What resource allocations are required to support this relationship? (See for instance: Guesalaga et al., In Press)
Being near to the top	Because key account customers are 'strategic customers', top management is involved in key account management decisions. In addition, top management involvement (in the supplier company) is common practice in KAM (See for instance: Guesalaga, 2015; Homburg & Workman, 2003)
Being integrated	The key account manager has relationships with a wide range of actors and teams of actors internally, and on the customer side (See for instance: Hutt & Walker, 2006; Speakman & Ryals; Workman et al, 2003; Gounaris & Tzempelikjos, 2014)
Being different	The key account management function does not overlap with other functions. (See Pardo et al., 2014)
Finding support in others	In implementing a relationship with a key account customer, the key account manager relies on all the resources he/she may have access to in his/her company and its related network (See Salojarvi & Saarenketo, 2013; Workman et al., 2003)
Being operational	The key account manager is not just a 'strategic manager'. Once the strategy with a key account customer is decided, he/she is in charge of its implementation. (See for instance: Guesalaga et al., In Press; Tzemeplikos & Gounaris, 2015)
Being nowhere	The key account managers develop a transversal vision of their mission, and though they usually report to a sales management team, they consider that they do not belong to a specific 'part' of the company (See for instance: Kempeners & Van der Hart, 1999; Homburg et al, 2002)
Supporting the company	The key account managers create value both for the key account customer AND the supplier company (See for instance, Henneberg et al., 2009; Pardo et al., 2006)
Being 'customer' oriented	The key account manager has very good knowledge of who the customer is and a specific customised value proposition is made to each key account customer (See for instance: Salojarvi & Saarenketo, 2013; Georges & Eggert, 2003 ; Gounaris & Tzempelikos, 2013)